

ARTS & THEATER

Art that's frozen in time

Cryogenic freezer houses objects in McKean exhibit

By Molly Glentzer, June 19, 2015



Photo: Inman Gallery

An installation view of Michael Jones McKean's show "one hundred twenty six million acres" at Inman Gallery, including the sculpture "the shade," made with a diesel generator, and the diptych "we are see-through we never die."

The cryogenic freezer hummed loudly, its temperature gauge hovering at minus 186 degrees.

The half-ton machine stood at a most unusual place on Main Street - not in some laboratory at the Texas Medical Center, where it might preserve DNA samples and organs for posterity (or until electricity ceases to exist) - but in the south room at Inman Gallery.

Topped with a tight grouping of classically shaped urns and "antennas" on which fake eyelashes float like butterflies, the freezer is the main component of a sculpture by the lanky, wild-haired and soft-voiced artist Michael Jones McKean. Entitled "the cold year," the piece has a room to itself in McKean's first solo show at Inman.

McKean, without cracking a smile, said he has never used a cryo-freezer as material before. He said he's placed nine small boulders inside to remove them from the "ambient temperature range" of the present, forcing them back through time or maybe forward into a "post-apocalyptic freeze."

He collected the rocks from Mexico, North America, Australia and China to represent moments of geological time.

He bought the freezer from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It arrived looking institutional, painted beige and white, about five months ago. McKean added the urns to emphasize mortality and the eyelashes as a tiny, slightly funny bit of human "residue." Then he cloaked the whole thing in black paint to give it a shadowy presence.

He imagined that "the cold year" would pivot, but for now the 78-by-69-by-32-inch sculpture squats heavily on the gallery's concrete floor. Plugging it in was important, McKean said, "because it's like an object that's alive." With an asking price of \$30,000, it's the show's heavy hitter.

Aesthetically though, the real star is "we are see-through we never die," a large diptych of vitrines containing finely sculpted friezes. Representations of a hand ax, an old Nokia cellphone and a MacBook Pro float randomly, all snowy white, on one side. Purple light bathes the larger portion, whose friezes suggest a levitating shroud and a cloudlike gathering of people in profile. A few small yellow rectangles hover over some of the faces, like the image-recognition frames that pop into your pictures on Facebook.

McKean imagined the people as a "family of man," inspired partly by the pre-Renaissance painter Giotto's attempts to create perspective. "How do you squeeze 40 people into this 6-inch space? What you end up with in sculpture is a low-relief process, which is super-ancient," he said. The yellow boxes are meant to help "race it forward," he added. "The way we think about relief now has more to do with photography. Everything becomes an image to us. We see an object, and we turn it into an image. Or we want an object, and the first thing we see is an image (online) before we press 'buy.'"

McKean has been using time as an "element" in sculpture for a while. He's also fascinated by the way his manipulations of objects take different amounts of time. "I like to play with speeds - do some things that require a slow touch and some things I make very quickly," he said.

Visitors who aren't careful could trip on "the present age," sculpted from insulation board, marine resin, urethane, paint, nylon fibers and 300 grams of silver. It perfectly mimics a folded Hudson Bay blanket into which someone has hidden a coiled-up laptop charger. "That charger holds our time very carefully, whereas a Hudson Bay blanket is more slushy: It could be 50 years old, 70 years old, 120 years old, or made today," McKean said.

Another fine piece, "the shade," began with a diesel generator. A stainless-steel flower sprouts from the machine, and attached "photo studio equipment" makes it look like the flower is about to be captured in a portrait.

"It was important that I started with a real, utilitarian object that transforms one kind of substance into another," McKean said. Because he also wanted to make the sculpture "uncanny," he coated it with meta-anthracite, a graphite substance made from coal dust. It doesn't just look cool, it makes a nice metaphor.

A couple of mixed-media collages on "canvases" of solar panels complete the spare show.

McKean said he wanted to give his "intensely handmade" art space to breathe. He doesn't want his labor to be the show's focus, but he figures with limited works to view, visitors are more likely to ask, "How did this come to be?"

That, he hopes, will lead them to see how each piece references a different type of heat exchange and "transmutation of energy." And if that isn't engaging enough, the show's title gives them the whole world to ponder: "a hundred twenty six billion acres." That's the Earth's surface area, including its oceans.

Dive in.